

BUILDING THE CAIRNS RANGE RAILWAY

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The passing of the years is adding to the romance of Australian exploration and discovery, more particularly as the genesis of many settlements of the interior as well as some of the coast towns can be traced directly to inland explorations. This is true in a marked degree in North Queensland, where the coast towns from Mackay to Cooktown, with the exception of Innisfail were founded as a result of either pastoral or mineral developments inland.

Squatters followed in the paths of Leichhardt, Landsborough and McKinlay, from the Suttor and Mackenzie Rivers to the Burdekin and the Cape River. As they progressed North came the necessity of an outlet to the sea. Bowen, Cardwell, Townsville and Mackay in turn served the needs of the respective areas of pastoral occupation. When Scott Bros. took up the Valley of Lagoons, and Ezra Firth made his pilgrimage to the Lynd, the way was paved for others, and soon all the country to the Gulf was taken up. So much for the pastoral industry but in another direction men were assiduous in seeking gold. In 1868 gold was found at the Cape River, a rush took place to the Gilbert in 1869, followed by the opening of Charters Towers and Ravenswood in 1872. Inspired perhaps by the reports of Daintree, the Government geologist, a party organised under the leadership of William Hann left Mount Surprise in June 1872, traversed the country to the northward from Mount Mulgrave and on their return reported that gold had been discovered at the Palmer. In 1873, J. V. Mulligan discovered payable gold on the Palmer, immediately followed by the opening of the Port of Cooktown. In 1876 Mulligan discovered the Hodgkinson goldfield, and again the effect was the opening first, the port of Cairns in 1876 and Port Douglas in 1877. But Mulligan had been making history before the find at the Hodgkinson River. In 1875 he led a party up the Mitchell, crossed the Barron at Biboohra, and following up the river, re-crossed the Barron near Lesprit's, went around the scrub at Tolga

and Atherton, and thence over the divide into the Wild River. Here, on June 6, 1875, he found good prospects of tin at his twentieth camp.

However, the towns of Cairns and Port Douglas later became the depots for the Hodgkinson goldfield and later Tinaroo, until in May 1880, about twelve miles below Mulligan's twentieth camp in 1875, a rich discovery of tin led to the Herberton rush. Although a dray road had been opened from Cairns up the range north of the Barron river on which £9,000 was spent, the only road available for wheeled traffic was to Port Douglas, and this Port enjoyed all the prosperity of the new rush. Still the packers used the track to Cairns to some extent, though the years 1880, and 1881 were the years of the greatest depression in Cairns, relieved to some extent by the Goldsborough rush at the Mulgrave River.

But the year 1882 saw the turning of the tide. In January of that year, Mr. Stubley, M.L.A. for Charters Towers, visited Herberton—which was in his electorate—and made the first public utterance on the subject of a railway to the coast. F. A. Cooper, M.L.A. for the Cook, was not behind in making a promise for a line to Port Douglas, and when on January 19, Mr. S. W. Griffith accompanied by Mr. W. Miles, the railways had become uppermost in men's minds. The coming general elections brought visits from other leading politicians, even McIlwraith's sixteen stone made the trip overland from Cooktown, Palmerville, Thornborough, Herberton and thence to Port Douglas. His mission was to further Land Grant Railways; Griffith's "no coolies", "no syndicates".

The people at Port Douglas formed a Railway League on February 7, 1882, and commenced what was to prove a long and sometimes bitter fight for the railway. But Cairns was not far behind in the agitation, and the arrival of Mr. Archie Meston on February 4 at once brought him into the fray. He became the leading spirit in the Cairns Railway League, keeping in constant touch with Herberton and the Government of the day.

Another personality came into the picture, following a visit of Mr. Macrossan, Minister for Works, in

March 1882. In consequence of a promise made to the people of Cairns and Port Douglas, he announced that Mr. Christie Palmerston had been commissioned to search for a route for a railway from Herberton to the coast. Palmerston commenced his journeys at the Mossman, and tried in turn the Mossman and Mowbray valleys for a route. From April 6 to August 1, he worked along the coast, White Cliffs, Collinson's Track, the Barron Valley and the Mulgrave all receiving his attention.

But another town came into competition for the railway and Geraldton on the Johnstone River pressed the claims of Mourilyan Harbour to either Cairns or Port Douglas, and a railway league was formed. Failing to get the Government to send Palmerston to find a route, the Divisional Board engaged him. Palmerston was delayed by the death of his boy Pompo, at Herberton in August 1882, but made the trip in November and arrived in Herberton nine days after leaving Mourilyan. Palmerston repeatedly came across the track which Inspector Douglas had marked in the May previous when he attempted to find a road through the scrub. His description needs no comment, and is contained in the following telegram from Inspector Douglas to the Colonial Secretary: "Arrived Mourilyan 28th May. Fearful trip. 19 days rain without intermission. No chance of a road. 20 days without rations, living principally on roots. Brought party safe but suffering from sores. Track marked and cut." Palmerston was able to see how Douglas had become entangled in some very precipitous country, which he might have avoided. However, the Board defaulted in the payment to Palmerston, alienating his support, though he always had a strong leaning to that route to the coast.

So much for the year 1882. On February 6, 1883, it was officially announced that Mr. G. W. Monk, surveyor, was appointed to investigate and report on a railway to the coast, and on May 11 he arrived in Cairns. Mr. Monk was an experienced bushman, and during the rest of the year he traversed the whole of the country between Port Douglas and Cairns to Granite Creek and thence to Herberton. In January 1884,

accompanied by Christie Palmerston, he made the trip from Herberton to Mourilyan Harbour.

In March 1884, the report of the routes was submitted, and on April 21, Mr. Willoughby Hannam decided on the Barron Valley route from Cairns.

Then came the storm of indignation, the rival towns of Port Douglas and Geraldton made strenuous efforts to have their claims recognised, but the survey of the Cairns line went on, though Mr. O. L. Amos carried out several trial surveys at Port Douglas. By February 1885, Mr. Monk and Mr. Amos were completing the working plans which were approved of by Cabinet on September 10, 1885.

Those sufficiently interested in the controversy which raged in 1885 and early in 1886, should read the pamphlet written by Swannick, now in the Oxley Memorial Library.

The contract for the first section was let to P. C. Smith & Co., and the first sod was turned on May 10. The Railway wharf was built by Louis Severin. But bad luck dogged the contractors. The first shipload of 2,600 tons of rails and materials by the "Lowther Castle" had to be lightered at a cost estimated at £2,000, as the vessel was drawing twenty-one feet and had to anchor at the Fairway Buoy till sufficiently lightened to enter the port. The delay prolonged the work till well into the wet season. Sickness was prevalent among the navvies, the conditions being so appalling that a magisterial enquiry was ordered into the deaths of two men, who died through lack of medical attention. The contractors threw up the work, which was taken over by McBride & Co., and eventually finished by the Queensland Government. The first section was officially opened on October 8, 1887, taking nearly eighteen months to finish some ten miles of railway.

Meantime the plans for the section had been completed and on January 21, 1887, it was known that John Robb's tender of £290,094 had been accepted. Early in March, Surveyor O. L. Amos had completed the permanent survey to Scrubby Creek (now Carrington). The first locomotive arrived by the brig "Mabel White" the same vessel unloaded the first consignment for

John Robb. The work on the second section had been commenced on April 28 by gangs on clearing, cuttings, etc., on sub-contracts. It was thus that the first fatal accident occurred at Beard's cutting where a man named Gavin Hamilton was engaged in burning off. A fire had been kindled in a gully, and Hamilton, getting on the wrong side to roll a log into the fire, overbalanced and was incinerated. In May, John Robb erected the sawmill at Barronville (later Kamerunga), the name was changed when the railway was taken on John Robb's camp and offices, at the instance of Archie Meston, whose home "Cambanora" was just opposite.

On July 16, 1887, occurred the second fatal accident at Number Seven tunnel, when a man named John Willoughby was charging a hole with explosive, a stone fell into the drill hole and he tried to scrape it out, the charge exploded, he died in ten minutes. Dr. Queely was the first doctor on the contract, but he was soon succeeded by Dr. Dobbie.

It is necessary to state that many vague statements were made as to the loss of life on the Cairns Range, but two have been mentioned to illustrate the kind of danger encountered, and only one other very serious accident occurred. During the building of Number Fifteen tunnel, seven lives were lost when the Cairns end subsided. The men employed were principally Italians and Irish, the Italians coming under a treaty between Queensland and Italy. Gilbert Parker In "Round the Compass in Australia" stresses the fact of the Italian labour, and noticed the Italian flag flying from the top of Robb's monument. I can remember this flag. Certain it is, that the men were nomadic, that the records were faulty, and that many men did not draw their wages, and were posted as missing, but this did not always imply they were killed on the job. Probably all the accidents were not reported. Many deaths occurred through sickness, and over £1,400 in wages remained unclaimed.

On that second section of fifteen and one-quarter miles there were fifteen tunnels, ninety-eight curves, —nine chains of four chain, fourteen of four and one-half chain, and four miles twenty chains of not less than seven chain. The principal of these were the Horse-Shoe Bend at the foot of the range, and at the

Stoney Creek bridge. The gradients on the range were between one in fifty and one in ninety-nine. Ten steel and 59 wooden bridges spanned every ravine and creek coming down the mountainside, some of the bridges hung dizzily over depths of hundreds of feet. Of the bridges, the most remarkable were the fairy-like bridge over Stoney Creek and the Surprise Creek bridge. Great escarpments were taken from the mountain side above the line, and every loose rock and overhanging tree was carefully removed. Thus the famous Red Bluff became a landmark as the line was built around the spur leading between the Stoney Creek below and the Barron Gorge.

During the construction, navvies' camps were formed at every cutting, bridge or tunnel. Comparatively narrow ledges became the sites of stores whose trade was not wholly catering for the needs of men in the way of groceries and drapery. At Number Three Tunnel, Stoney Creek, the Springs (at the foot of the Glacier Rock), Camp Oven Creek, Surprise Creek, and Gray's Pocket on Rainbow Creek just above the Falls were in their day busy and thriving mushroom towns on a very small scale.

That second section ended at Myola, and was completed and opened for goods traffic on June 15, 1891, and for passengers on June 25, five years from the turning of the first sod, and thus the great engineering feat was accomplished with the opening of that first thirty miles of railway.

But even then, the story was not ended, for in 1892 John Robb filed a further claim for £262,311, and in 1893 the arbitrators awarded him £20,807 in final settlement.

Whatever may be said now of those years when the Queensland Government adopted a policy of heavy borrowing, when Cairns secured its railway at a cost of a million and a quarter pounds, when Cairns was accused that political influence swayed the issue—still it must be admitted that the gateway to the rich mineral belt and much richer and more enduring agricultural land was opened up. Incidentally, the commencement of the railway marked the beginning of the prosperity of Cairns. The completion of the line to the west ac-

centuated the need for harbour improvements. To-day the facilities for shipping justify the pride of the people in their city, but the determining factor was the building of the Cairns Range Railway.

Addenda :

The administration and construction of the Cairns railway was, in 1885 and 1886, centred in the office of the Railway Department at Rockhampton, and the names of those associated with the survey and engineering appear in a list taken from Votes and Proceedings, Vol. III, pp. 324-363, pp. 583-588. A list taken from Pugh 1884 gives the names of the various officers who were directly responsible for the survey of, and the building of the Range Railway:

Chief Engineer Central District: Robert Ballard;

Construction Engineer: Willoughby Hannam, C.E.

Assistant Engineer: E. A. Delisser;

Surveyors: G. W. Monk, F. Grayson, N. E. Amos, Chas. Gardiner, O. L. Amos, Martin Gardiner, J. P. Amos, H. Greensil, P. Grayson, E. McDonnell.